

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ORANGE COUNTY

Beginnings

The first people to live in Orange County came here thousands of years ago. They lived by hunting and fishing and gathering the plants and seeds. When the first Spanish explorers arrived, they found two native groups here. They called the *Acjachemen* people in the southern part of the county the Juaneño, and the *Tongva* people to the north the Gabrielino.

In 1769, Spain sent Catholic missionaries and Spanish soldiers to colonize California. Don Gaspar de Portolá led the first overland expedition through Orange County that summer. In 1771, Father Junípero Serra founded Mission San Gabriel in what is now Los Angeles County. Five years later, on November 1, 1776, Mission San Juan Capistrano was founded. The two missions laid claim to much of what would become Orange County, grazing cattle, horses, and sheep here until the 1830s.

In 1784, Manuel Nieto, a retired Spanish soldier, was granted grazing rights between the Santa Ana and San Gabriel rivers. Around 1800, Juan Pablo Grijalva began running cattle south and east of the Santa Ana River; in 1810 his son-in-law, José Antonio Yorba, and his grandson, Juan Pablo Peralta, received a formal concession to the land that became known as the Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana.

Mexico broke away from Spain in 1821, and the Mexican government secularized the California missions in 1834. More and more settlers were granted grazing lands. By 1846, almost all of Orange County was part of one rancho or another. Trading vessels from the United States and other countries sailed up and down the California coast, collecting cattle hides and tallow in return for manufactured goods.

With the end of the Mexican War in 1848, California was ceded to the United States by Mexico. When California became a state in 1850, what is now Orange County was a part of Los Angeles County.

The Gold Rush of 1849 brought thousands of new settlers to California, and gave the rancheros a new market for their cattle, sold to feed hard-working miners. The local economy soared. But a series of droughts, floods, and diseases, and the costs of defending the ownership of their lands in the American courts eventually drove many of the rancheros to ruin.

Some of the old ranchos were sold to new American owners with names like Stearns, Bixby and Irvine, and sheep ranching began replacing cattle during the Civil War. Other ranchos were broken up and sold off in pieces to settlers and developers.

Communities Form

Anaheim was the first American town founded in what is now Orange County. In 1857, a group of German immigrants living in San Francisco bought a portion of the Rancho San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana to start a new community, built on winemaking. After the initial development was complete, the first colonists moved to Anaheim in 1859.

In 1868, vast areas on either side of the Santa Ana River were placed on the market, and the towns of Santa Ana, Tustin, Orange, Westminster, and Garden Grove were soon founded. Farming became the backbone of the local economy. Wine and raisin grapes, wheat, barley, and corn were all successful. In the 1870s, new irrigation systems were built, which allowed more trees crops to be planted, including walnuts, apricots, and the first few orange groves.

In 1870, the first commercial vessel entered Newport Bay, which soon became a regular shipping point. The Southern Pacific built the first railroad in the area, extending its tracks south from Los Angeles to Anaheim in 1875.

A County is Born

The Southern Pacific railroad held a monopoly in Southern California until 1885, when the Santa Fe pushed its tracks over the Cajon Pass. Competition brought a burst of advertising, and a sharp drop in ticket prices, setting off a great real estate boom throughout the region. New towns and subdivisions sprang up by the dozens as tourists and settlers poured into Southern California, and existing communities grew rapidly.

But in less than two years, the boom had collapsed, and with it, many of the new towns. Carlton, San Juan-by-the-Sea, St. James, and other “paper towns” faded away. Others, like Fullerton, Buena Park, and El Toro survived.

The burst of economic growth and local pride in 1886-88 led to the creation of the County of Orange in 1889. As early as 1870, local residents tried to break away from Los Angeles and form their own county, but it was not until 1889 that the California Legislature passed a bill to allow a vote on county division.

Originally, the proposed county line was drawn at the San Gabriel River, but the line was moved south to Coyote Creek to help gain support in Sacramento. This angered Anaheim and some of the other northern communities, that had hoped to be near the center of the new county, and they voted against the measure. But the rest of the area voted overwhelming for division. Santa Ana was selected as the county seat, and the County of Orange was officially formed on August 1, 1889.

Wealth from the Soil

Until the 1950s, agriculture remained the most important part of Orange County’s economy. As other crops disappeared, citrus became more and more popular. The grape industry never recovered from a devastating blight in 1886-87. Apricots had all but disappeared by 1920. Growers began planting celery, sugar beets, walnuts, and lima beans in the 1890s. Cattle still grazed on the vast ranches in the southern end of the county, while dairy farms grew up in the north. But it was citrus that came to dominate the area. By the 1930s, Orange County was producing a sixth of the nation’s Valencia orange crop.

The oil industry also played a key role in the development of Orange County. The first successful wells were drilled locally in the 1890s along the northern edge of the county. Oil fields were soon

developed in La Habra, Brea Canyon, and Olinda. Major strikes in Placentia (1919) and Huntington Beach (1920) started an oil boom that swept the county. While agriculture has all but disappeared, many local oil wells are still pumping today.

Transportation

Much of Orange County's growth in the first half of the 20th Century was fueled by new forms of transportation. Between 1904 and 1910, the Pacific Electric Railway built three main lines to serve Orange County with its "big red cars." The coast line spurred development from Seal Beach to Corona del Mar. The Santa Ana line prompted the founding of Cypress and Stanton. And the La Habra line ran all the way down to Yorba Linda.

In the 1910s and 1920s, new highways led the way to new communities. California's first state highway in 1914-15 crossed Orange County from San Juan Capistrano to La Habra. Several small communities later developed along Beach and Manchester boulevards, and the completion of the Coast Highway in 1926 brought new growth to places like Laguna Beach and Dana Point.

Freeway construction began in the 1950s with the opening of the Santa Ana (I-5) Freeway, and continued almost unabated into the 1970s. Beginning in the 1990s, toll roads were built to meet the needs of growing communities.

Modern Development

During World War II, a number of important military bases were established in Orange County, including the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, the Los Alamitos Naval Weapons Station, and the Santa Ana Army Air Base. At the end of the war, many veterans decided to settle in Southern California, and the region began to grow at an unprecedented rate.

By the mid-1950s, Orange County's farms were being replaced by tract housing faster than any other community in the United States. Existing cities began annexing territory in every direction, and new cities incorporated almost every year. Between 1953 and 1962, Buena Park, Costa Mesa, La Palma, Garden Grove, Cypress, Westminster, Fountain Valley, Los Alamitos, San Juan Capistrano, and Villa Park all voted to incorporate. In 1963, the county population topped one million.

Tourism, manufacturing, and the service industry began to dominate the local economy. The opening of Disneyland in 1955 made Orange County an international tourist destination. Beginning in the late 1950s, aerospace firms and light industry began expanding here, and the increasing population meant more and more jobs at hospitals, restaurants, and stores.

South Orange County began to grow in the 1960s, with master planned communities such as Irvine, Mission Viejo, and Laguna Niguel. Aliso Viejo, Rancho Santa Margarita, Ladera Ranch, and others followed in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, Orange County is home to more than three million residents, with 34 incorporated cities.